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ABSTRACT

The art of poetry is being worn away by democracy, the rule of the average, and by an attitude of narcissism which equates sincere endeavor with significant endeavor. The opening lines of several poems taken from a poetry journal reveal a distinct lack of significant emotion. While poetry is the most significant expression of the Self, the "I" of poetry has become the literal "I" of the poet, not "I," the persona, thus reducing the universality of the poetic act. Contemporary poetry is more an exercise in sociology than in art: everyone has grown lyrical--the singing masses. The attitudes generating this poetry of democracy are as follows: (1) any act of a properly authentic Self is a significant act; (2) everything must do something, therefore poetry should have a purpose; and (3) for every properly motivated and moneyed Self, everything--including the ability to write poetry--should be accessible. The government has played a role in the democratization of poetry by funding such programs as Poetry in the Schools, to make poetry "fun" and "accessible." Poetry is hard work. It is neither fun nor easy. What is needed is fewer people writing poetry, not more. American marketing has also reduced poetry to the lowest common denominator, by offering noon-hour poetry workshops in local shopping malls. This is the current state of the art for which John Keats spilled out his life. (HTH)

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Poetry and the 'Me' Generation: Democratizing the Ars Poetica

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I am not comparing myself with Pope and Byron when I point out that there is a tradition of dissatisfaction with whatever poetry happens to be fashionable. And a good bit of what I am about to say has been hinted at before, some of it in print, and some over beer. Some of it hasn't. What I want to do here is to say it with a clear voice.

The art of poetry is in big trouble. Call me Jeremiah if you will, lamenting the degradation of the poetic ethic. But hear me out.

I believe that democracy, the rule of The Average, has killed the ars poetica in this country, and I believe that it has been aided in this destruction by the relentless narcissism which as arisen in the last two decades and which preaches that any sincere human endeavor is significant endeavor. And consumerism is not a little bit of the problem as well.

I have a MFA in poetry. I help edit a poetry journal. I write poems and am fairly widely published. I love poetry, a lot of poetry, in English and in other languages. I read poetic criticism by the bucket, and I teach poetry in college. It is difficult to find anything about poetry that doesn't interest me. Yet in the most recent issue of one of the nation's most respected contemporary poetry periodicals I was unable to find one single article or poem or interview that I finished for the pleasure of it. These are the beginning lines of some of the poems:

1. It is somewhat irresponsible
   to saunter after the theater
   through the nameless town...

2. Because I said I did and because I never did
   I am now someone who has only to remember...

3. Our eyes meet over other
   couples' shoulders, and another
   lovesong launches its vows...

4. if he weren't my brother, I'd have thought
   him homely, but since they said we
   resembled each other...

An interview begins: "No, my mother interests me as a person, but not as a persona. The mother in my poems has nothing to do with my mother. If anything, I was thinking more of my father...," etc.

What's happening here?

Now I really don't believe that every poem has to be a sonnet of the quality of Shakespeare's or Keats', or even a sonnet, period. I don't believe that every interview has to be a barn burner. But these ramblings wouldn't even interest the poets' mothers. There is not an ounce of what T. S. Eliot called "significant emotion." Sincere emotion, yes, but significant, no. How did we get here? First some background.

Art has always been considered the highest and most significant expression of the Self, and nowhere has the Self found more significant expression than in poetry. But something has happened to the "I" of poetry: It has become the literal "I" of the poet, not "I, the persona," thus reducing the universality of the poetic act, a condition which Helen Vendler terms "an impoverishment" (The New York Review, Feb. 19, 1981, p. 33.) Christopher Lasch in his seminal The Culture of Narcissism

says "... many writers find it more and more difficult to achieve the detachment indispensable to art, (p. 17) and further states that [the artist] ... in recording his 'inner ' experiences, ... seeks... to seduce others into giving him their attention, acclaim or sympathy and thus to shore up his faltering sense of self." He is saying that for various reasons, political, economic, and otherwise, there has been a massive artistic retreat into solipcism in the last few years. Robert Penn Warren, in Democracy and Poetry, noticed the trend in 1975 when he stated, "authenticity is a magic word to summon spirits from the vasty deep. The 'authentic' doing of one's 'thing' [is not] an exclusively reliable index to the existence of the immortal soul " (p. 46.)

Many of these matters are as complex as Modernity; many are the proper province of philosophy, and encompass forces which began (in Western thought) with Rousseau and Romanticism, and have culminated in the ultra-populist "reader-response criticism" which, according to Gerald Graff, "gives the reader the 'right' to fabricate his own private meaning of a work [of literature] as if this were the extension of the citizen's right to his opinion" (The New Republic, Feb. 14, 1981, p. 36.) So we find ourselves in a time when art belongs to the people, the Democracy, one person at a time, writing poems as if jogging laps. Art is easy; anyone can do it, or at least everyone deserves to be able to.

Additionally, as Walker Percy contends in his various writings, there seems to be an increased need for "certification," which is to say that we as individuals in this culture desperately need concrete means of establishing our Selfhood. He notes the

practice of taking snapshots while on vacation to certify to our friends and, above all, to ourselves that we have really been to the Grand Canyon. Many of our contemporary poems are like family photos of the artist, standing before his subject faintly smiling, and with the Polaroid, everything is so easy.

Contemporary poetry then is more an exercise in sociology than in art. Everyone has grown lyrical--the singing masses, writing hundreds of thousands of poems, self-certifications, a teeming chorus of readings, chapbooks and little literary magazines.

In seeking to explain this burst of song we need to look at some of the attitudes which have emerged in these times and which help generate the poetry of democracy. One, as we have already mentioned, is the idea that any act of a properly authentic Self is a significant act. The second is that everything must do something, that poetry should have a purpose. The third is that to the properly motivated, attuned, and moneyed Self, everything, including the ability to write good poetry, ought to be accessible. Let's examine how these ideas have made themselves manifest.

The first is best illustrated by an anecdote. A local poet organized, offered, and packed a series of creative writing workshops entitled Soaring. I went to the first of them, more out of curiosity than anything else. Twenty student poets were therein assembled. A textbook was for sale, The Zen of Seeing. After we all introduced ourselves, we were asked to close our eyes and write the first poem that came to mind. Then we read our poems to the workshop. Apparently the only criterion that caused something to be deemed a poem was that lines not extend all the way

to the right-hand side of the page. Our instructor liked every one of them very much.

Next a bowl of fruit was circulated among the writers. We were asked to fondle the fruit, then write a poem about it. We did, and we read our poems to the group. Our instructor liked every one of them very much.

"Don't you feel silly?" I said to the instructor aloud. "Hey that's a poem too," she exclaimed and wrote it on the board.

Don't
You feel
silly?

I left the whole braying lot of them and walked out into the night. When I thought of all the agony the young John Keats had spilled over his art, I got red with anger. I am still angry.

I don't know what a poem is, but I know what it isn't, and for starters it isn't easy, and no one can do it off the top of the head without practice. Why do these people pick on poetry? No one in his right mind would buy a violin and one month later give a concert, and expect people to listen, and furthermore, to enjoy. But at least once a week I have someone come to my office with "The First Poem I've Ever Written." "Have you read much poetry," I usually ask. "No," they usually answer. "Then go read some, a lot, and rewrite this poem using what you have learned." Usually I never see them again. I have asked them to go to too much trouble.

Self-certification has made for boom years in the vanity presses. A few months ago a woman called me and wanted me to edit the manuscript of her first book of poems. A publisher had consented to publish it she said. I agreed, and she brought it

by. There were 56 poems, 54 of which were in the first person singular (two were in the first person plural). We went over a few. "Are they any good?" she asked. "No," I answered. She was miffed. "Just correct the grammar and spelling, then." she snapped. I did, and a week later she picked up the bundle. After several months she brought me a copy of her book. When I saw the name of the publisher, a well-known regional "vanity" press, I asked what she had paid.

"$1,500," she admitted.

"When are you going to pay me for editing your manuscript?"

"How much do you want?"

"About $100," I said.

"Oh Heavens," she replied and offered me five.

Knowing defeat when I saw it, I took the money.

The second of the three attitudes I've mentioned, the notion that poetry must do something, has given us a couple of phenomena having little or nothing to do with art. One of these is therapeutic poetry and the other is political poetry. Last fall I had the opportunity to interview the fine American poet, Richard Hugo, and to ask him to comment upon misuses of poetry. In my classes I am forever warring against the inevitable individual who wants to turn the class into a therapy session, the person who submits an obviously agonizing, paginated, self-certification to a workshop labeled in the catalogue as Poetry Workshop. So I asked Hugo:

> "What about the workshop participants who say, Hey, listen to me--I hurt. I'm talking about a genre of highly personal confessional poetry which

> seems to have been used by writers more for therapeutic purposes than for artistic ones. I can never bring myself to tell these people what I really feel: that they should have left the poem at home under their mattress. I'm serious. Often the workshops have a tendency to turn into therapy groups..."

He replied:

> "A poem is a thing made. That's what it means in the Greek. The cry is not enough. You have to go out and make something. If you're not making anything, if you're just crying out; that isn't going to last, nor be very satisfying to the artist. The artist will always be unfulfilled."

As for the other main kind of pragmatic poetry let me say that politics is seldom art and successful art has seldom been political. The political climate <u>does</u> influence art, of course, but most art commissioned to serve political ends has failed. I asked Hugo about this:

> "I tend to think of politics as being over-simplifications of necessity. You have to stand with this or that party; you have to take this or that stand on each issue. I think of art as being more complex than that, that it can accommodate different shades of truth that political thinking cannot. If you got too subtle with political thinking, there would never be any results."

And all of this is not to say that I am apolitical or callous

toward those who cry out. I am not. I just believe that the mere statement of a personal problem or a political problem isn't a poem.

And finally, there's the matter of the accessibility of poetry, with the movement of poets and poems in our country, a complex undertaking which takes its lessons from business, supply and demand being key factors. The major thrust began when our poets home from World War II found jobs in the large universities. People who write poetry will inevitably teach creative writing, and their students will write poems, grow up to be famous poets themselves, and in turn will start creative writing programs of their own, etc., which has happened. This year there are about seventy colleges offering the MA or MFA in creative writing. In addition, there are scores of English departments offering undergraduate programs for poets and fiction writers. This means that every year hundreds of would-be poets must be recruited to keep the universities' writing programs solvent. Where do they all come from? They come from our consumerist society which has been taught that if you want fast food you go to McDonald's, and if you want straight teeth you go to an orthodontist. Similarly, if you want to learn to write, you rent a writing program for a year or two (or three in some cases) and presto!, you are lyrical. Easy as pie. The schools have students and the faculty have jobs.

But what about the hundreds of graduates from these programs. What do <u>they</u> do for a living? Some of course start writing programs where none have been, and some few find jobs in the older, more established programs.

How do they get such a job? They publish a lot of poems,

in journals, and in books; they give readings, and they win contests--the greatest lyrical outpouring in the history of humankind. The winners of this epic sing get tenure track jobs (about 20 last year); the less successful get part-time and non-tenure-track jobs and teach freshman English till they decide to go back to get their Ph.D.'s. And the losers (or winners depending on how you look at it) heap stones.

It is also possible to win (or lose) by making a successful journal among the hundreds which have sprung up to accommodate all this warbling. The larger and more prestigious of these, Anteus and Poetry Northwest for example, may sift through as many as 30,000 poems a year. 60,000 poems by two magazines! But it is also possible to heap stones up against thepublishing business as witnessed by the number of little magazines which spring up and die off year by year. And this poetic mass production has a deadly effect on the quality of the work. After all, how different can 60,000 poems be from one another? I know that computer poetry has been around for a while, but I have good money that says I can program a $300 alphameric calculator to produce a poem enough like those being published now, that I can get the mindless little utterance published in a little magazine somewhere.

This "central tendency," this average art has given us what the critic Jonathan Holden has called "affected naturalness," (The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric, pp. 3-21) a resignedness in which the writer (to paraphrase Lasch, p. 64) is like a prostitute who attempts to move others while remaining unmoved, a condition exemplified by the flat banal lines I have earlier reproduced. I have an acquaintance, a wonderfully

cynical individual, who has been quite successful writing a particular journal's "average" poem; he will peruse the magazine and then write a poem containing as many of the obvious editorial prejudices as he finds there. Again, the "mean" art. It works well for him. He has just been offered a job in the state arts bureaucracy.

This seems like a good time to bring up the subject of the governments' role in the democratization of poetry. The Federal government and state and local governments also, well intentioned as usual, but as usual, a little off the mark, provide money to help distribute poetry to the many. Take the Poetry-in-the-Schools program as an example of the worst sort of coming together of the forces of democracy and the forces of art. What happens is this: our government arts councils, people like you and me who have an interest in art and who have found yet another way to avoid the stone heap, pay money to other potential stone heapers like you and me to go out into the public schools and show the kids that, despite what they have always thought, poetry is really quite accessible, and furthermore, it is fun. And among the poets themselves, there is often a missionary spirit. One young poet once told me "If I can get just one kid to see the light, then my job has been worthwhile."

All this raises at least a couple of questions, the first of which is, "Why does everything have to be fun?" Hard work is almost never fun; whatever emotions I've experienced in trying to write poems, fun has never been one of them. To create is often agonizing, and sometimes rewarding, but it is <u>almost never</u> fun. And it is <u>absolutely never</u> easy. Neither is poetry

accessible; what makes it poetry is its involution, the intertwined threads of meaning and overtone. Doggerel is accessible. But poetry isn't.

The second question is, "Why do we have to take the art of poetry to everyone." Why do we need more people writing poetry? We don't. What we need is fewer. The kid who will grow up to become good poet is likely to do so even without Poetry-in-the-Schools. And it is a temptation to believe that the Muse visits a fixed amount of poetic wisdom upon a culture, which gift, spread among so many singers, leaves not so sweet a song in the mouth of any one.

The people at the National Endowment have their hearts in the right place, and poets do benefit financially from the P-I-T-S program and the kids in the schools do enjoy the visiting artists because it takes their minds off less important things like learning to read, write, and cipher. But a less innocent force, the might of American marketing, has entered the picture and has given us what I perceive to be the culmination of poetic democratization.

If a concern wanted to market poetry in the crassest possible way, to the most consumerist of consumers, in the best grab-it-and-go tradition of modern American taste, what would it do? It would offer poetry workshops at the noon hour at the local shopping mall, which is what it did: the Stop and Study Program offered by a nearby branch of the state university. Was it successful? I asked the instructor, an author of poetry books for children. "We packed them in," he said. "Was the poetry any good," I asked.

"Most of it was quite good." I thought of the young Keats. I asked no more foolish questions.

So again, what is happening here? The "me" generation is happening, a culture in which artistic activity is mistaken for creativity, where the "old" is mistaken for "old fashioned," where doing something is more important than doing it well, and where everybody thinks they deserve everything.

Not everyone can write poetry well. Not many people understand what constitutes significant emotion. It's not available to the masses for the price of tuition. A poem is not a Big Mac, and the art of poetry is not the aesthetic equivalent of jogging.

So let me say that yesterday I got two poems accepted by a pretty good little magazine. They weren't very good poems but what-the-hell? It's a publication. I am about to be off on a two-week tour in the Poetry-in-the-Schools program, and I have a grant request filed with both the NEA and the State Arts Council. I am scheduled to teach the Poetry Workshop at my university next fall, and I would teach Stop and Study if the money were right.

Enrollment is always good in my workshops. Some of my students really do write excellent poetry. As I say this I am trying very hard not to think of the young John Keats spilling out his life for his art.